

Call Centre Cosmopolitanism: Global Capitalism and Local Identity in Indian Fiction

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With approximately 350,000 employees, India's call centres employ less than 1/10th of one percent of India's estimated workforce. Yet business process outsourcing companies (BPOs) have, according to Shashi Tharoor, "become the symbol of India's rapidly globalizing economy" for both Indians and citizens of the West, as evidenced from a proliferation of fiction, non-fiction, films and television shows around the world that depict Indian call centres (78). Much analysis of the call centre as a place of cultural hybridity has focused on the deleterious impact of call centre agents' need to take on new names, accents, and personal stories that disguise their location and origins in India. The anti-social shifts, which tailor Indian work schedules to suit customer demands in North America and Europe, have also been a subject of some critique. Yet it is far from clear that workers who participate in India's burgeoning BPO industry view their work in such purely negative terms. Like home-based garment subcontractors, who "feel empowered through their access to an income independent from other household members" despite their low wages and exploitative working conditions (Nagar et al. 264), call centre workers themselves may feel that the gain in both financial and cultural capital that comes with this form of employment outweighs other disadvantage, or, at the very least, makes their situation far more complex than these critiques allow.

Recent novels about call centres, such as Shruti Saxena's *Stilettoes in the Boardroom* (2009) and Brinda S. Narayan's *Bangalore Calling* (2011), depict the call centre as a space where boundaries imposed by caste, religion, gender and region are both transgressed and erased. The offices, cafes and shopping malls of recent Indian BPO fiction are simultaneously spaces of global capitalism and local cosmopolitanism, which have been alternatively represented as amoral and corrupt—as in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008)—and as offering the opportunity to revel in a liberating, postmodern self-fashioning, as in Bharati Mukherjee's *Miss New India* (2011).

Cosmopolitanism as a concept has already undergone a substantial change over the last thirty years. As Bruce Robbins points out,

[u]nderstood as a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole, cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives.... But many voices now insist... that the term should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged. (1)

This definitional shift invites various new positions from which cosmopolitanism might be potentially experienced and defined. As Arjun Appadurai suggests, “emergent cosmopolitanisms of the world have complex local histories” (64). Indian call centres offer one specific locus of emergent cosmopolitanism, which call centre novels explore in a number of ways.

There are relevant recent theories of cosmopolitanism to draw on. For example, Susan Koshy argues that Asian-American experience can best be understood in terms of “*minority cosmopolitanism*” which refers to “translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects and are marked by a critical awareness of the constraints of primary attachments such as family, religion, race, and nation and by an ethical or imaginative receptivity, orientation or aspiration to an interconnected or shared world” (594; italics in original). I argue that with its emphasis on minority status, Koshy’s focus on the transnationality and cosmopolitanism of Asian-Americans would seem to reinforce the construction of the West as the proper place of cosmopolitanism, implicitly relegating Asians within Asia to an anti- or pre-cosmopolitan space. In the age of call centres and business process outsourcing, however, I contend that physical mobility between nation-states is not the sole, or even most inevitable, path to critical awareness of “family, religion, race, and nation.” South Asians, in particular, increasingly find themselves enmeshed in translocal affiliations without ever leaving the subcontinent, engendering new opportunities to imagine and live cosmopolitan lives. Though not always minority subjects, Koshy’s cosmopolitanism might apply to call centre workers, too.

In *Miss New India*, the final installment of Mukherjee’s acclaimed trilogy, the protagonist, Anjali, never actually works in a call centre, but, I argue, it is the very idea of the IT-enabled workplace and its accompanying cultural economy that structures her identity as *Miss New India*. At the beginning of the novel, nineteen-year-old Anjali is trying to choose between an arranged marriage, desired by her parents, and going to Bangalore to try to get a job in a call centre, an option repeatedly suggested by her English teacher, Peter Champion. The main character utilizes two distinct names, and accordingly splits herself into two distinct personas. Anjali is the character’s given name, and she is the traditional Bengali girl, about to be married off by her parents. Angie is the Westernized nickname she prefers to deploy in certain contexts, and Angie’s persona is both more daring and more westernized. It is Angie who listens to European rock music, wears jeans and t-shirts and deliberately attracts attention by riding through the marketplace on the back of her teacher’s scooter. Angie / Anjali is also tall, green-eyed, fair and particularly impresses “the rare foreigners who passed through” the town of Gauripur (7). Within Appadurai’s schema, then, she arguably lives a form of local cosmopolitanism from the beginning. In the beginning, however, her hybrid identity poses something of a problem, as (traditional) marriage and career seem to offer her incommensurate paths. Initially, Angie / Anjali delays setting a course for her future and dallies in the marriage market. But then she is raped by a suitor, Subodh

Mitra, and decides to flee to Bangalore with the financial backing of Champion.

The manner in which Angie / Anjali travels to Bangalore, and the circumstances that propel her there are significant. Indeed, Angie's rape is foreshadowed from the very beginning of the story; she is continuously worried about being assaulted, but, it seems, she attaches her fear to the wrong people. First she fears Peter, her English teacher, and then Rabi Chatterjee, both of whom are actually gay. Neither has any sexual interest in her; they are objects of sexual fear because of their foreignness. Instead, their desire is to see Angie / Anjali leave Gauripur and avoid an arranged marriage. Peter's "*forcing adulthood on*" her (51; italics in original)—which is how Angie / Anjali understands her teacher's insistence that she enter the professional realm—thus parallels Subodh's forcing himself on her. Adulthood, and self-realization, only appear to be possible after her rape. Angie / Anjali's entry into womanhood, adulthood, and global labour may therefore be an entry into globalized citizenship, but it is not a very promising one for any female subject.

In their book, *The End of Capitalism*, J.K. Gibson-Graham¹ point out that the discourse of globalization propounded by both its opponents and its critics is strikingly similar to the discourse around rape. Sharon Marcus, who points to the existence of a "language of rape" which assumes that "rape has always already occurred or women are always either already raped or rapeable" (385). Rape is thus understood "as an inevitable material fact of life and assume that a rapist's ability to physically overcome his target is the foundation of rape" (387). This discourse underscores Angie / Anjali's fears in *Miss New India* and explains her responses to Subodh, which I will discuss further below. Drawing on Marcus's work, Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham argue that "globalization is represented as the penetration (or imminent penetration) of capitalism into all processes of production, circulation and consumption, not only of commodities but also of meaning" (120). The logic of global capitalism deems market penetration by the West as both necessary and desirable, and leads not only to the flow of goods, but to a narrative of the inevitability of globalization that may shore up every other aspect of its spread—both material and cultural. As Angus Cameron and Ronen Palan point out, globalization is, more than anything else, an act "of narrative framing" rather than an objectively verifiable reality (54). In that sense, there is a close parallel between the concept of globalization and that of cosmopolitanism; indeed, the two are often discursively linked (Robbins 13).

Angie / Anjali's suspicions of her mentor and friend connote an acceptance of this discourse. She cannot conceive of any male interest in her life or prospects outside of a heterosexual economy of exchange, a discourse, which as Gibson and Graham explain, disavows both queer sexuality, and non-capitalist economic exchange. Indeed, the doomed marital negotiations between Angie's father and Subodh Mitra indicate that global capitalism has also entered that, most traditional, relationship of consumption and exchange. Her father, unaware that Mitra has just raped his daughter, and eager to conclude negotiations for the dowry

“suggested that maybe a Japanese watch and a computer would close the deal.” To which Subodh responds: “Yeah, maybe he’ll go for the gold watch—Swiss, not Japanese—a set of matched golf clubs and an American computer and an imported laptop for me—a PC, Toshiba or Dell—and a selection of games and movies” (64).

Angie / Anjali also participates in and accedes to the rape script that Marcus identifies on a variety of levels. In this way, not only are globalized commodities central to their encounter, but also, new and violent meanings. As he begins his assault, Subodh first switches to speaking Bengali, “a language that robbed her of power and nuance” (59). She doesn’t resist him physically when the assault begins. Later, when he forces her to perform fellatio, he pumps “her head until she [is] able to do it herself” (61). Prior to this point in the novel, much has been made of Angie / Anjali’s abilities—academic, linguistic, and otherwise. Here, the word “able” is violently repurposed and signifies not Angie / Anjali’s capacity to perform the action in question but rather, her forced compliance with his desires and the loss of her agency and volition. After Subodh ejaculates, he states: “You know what you have to do” and removes her underpants (62). Subodh does not overwhelm Anjali with physical force, but rather, positions her within a script of powerlessness that she already knows all too well. He does not have to name his demand for sexual intercourse in order for it to be understood.

Angie / Anjali imagines a rape script that ends in death and asks Subodh if he will kill her, to which he responds, “don’t be stupid” (62). So, after having initially imagined a Bollywood-style rescue for herself when the assault begins, which fails to materialize, Angie then imagines committing suicide (5). The Bollywood script, then, and the arranged marriage script, are, in *Miss New India*, isomorphic with the rape script. Even after Subodh returns her to her parents’ apartment, Angie / Anjali continues to lack active strategies of resistance. She does not tell her parents—or anyone else—what has happened, fearing that she will lose control of the meaning and narrative of the assault. Angie’s rape is therefore, as Sharon Marcus argues, “an important *inscription* of female sexual identity” which “*engenders* a sexualized female body defined as a wound...” (13). When she boards the intercity bus for Bangalore, an older man sits beside her and places his hand on her breast. She stares at him until, eventually, he moves away.

This loss of linguistic control is repeated upon her arrival in Bangalore. This time, however, she is overwhelmed and silenced not by sexual assault, but by the proliferation of capitalism. When Angie first arrives in Bangalore, she encounters not only new models for consumption—epitomized by a Western-style coffee shop—but also new ways of using the English language, which she previously believed she could command. It’s a language steeped in colloquialism and global culture, and involves recasting the meaning of words such as cool and bitch.

Rape and globalization are, Gibson and Graham argue, both positioned as inevitable; responses can only be ameliorative and after the fact. The alternative script Angie pursues in going to Bangalore, that of career woman, is, clearly, at least partially an ameliorative act, since

it is a response to her supposed reduction of value on the marriage market. It is also associated in the text with an ambivalent attitude with respect to consent in heterosexual intercourse. On her first day in Bangalore, in a shiny western-style café, Angie / Anjali meets Girish Gujral (GG) with whom she will ultimately exchange sex for personal and career assistance. When she accepts GG's invitation to visit his apartment, an invitation with clear innuendo, she claims that "[s]he could not be held responsible for anything that happened in her life because she was not an initiator of actions....Anjali just watched and let things happen" (224). This statement appears to apply equally to her intimate and professional life. GG initiates sex, just as he initiates her into Bangalore capitalism, and she does not resist. Indeed, she compares herself to a prostitute, and understands her acceptance of sexual intercourse as a business proposition. Even so, she resolves to tell others, if asked, that "she'd been abducted" (226). When Angie submits to globalization, in pursuing Peter Champion's suggestion that she try to find work in a call centre, she actually reinforces her own sexual subjugation.

It is Girish who ultimately gets Angie a job in an outsourced debt collection company at the end of the novel. What makes her an ideal candidate for a job in the service sector may not be her excellent English skills and ambition, as Peter Champion initially suggests, but her propensity for "docile and deferential attitudes and performances" (270), which, as Richa Nagar *et al* point out, these heavily surveilled positions demand. This submission operates on both the individual and the cultural level. Within the novel, Angie / Anjali is eager to embrace all things western. As a cultural product, the novel as a whole is also noteworthy for its ready accessibility for the non-Indian reader. Linda Leith points out in her review for *The Globe and Mail*, "American cultures and values have never played a bigger roll in Mukherjee's work than they do here." Indeed, *Miss New India* has also been dubbed "passé" by Indian reviewers (such as Kishwar Desai), who argue that these kinds of call centre positions, which arguably require relatively few professional skills, do not actually represent the current state of India's digital economy. Paradoxically, Anjali herself sees call centre work as "dead end" even before she lands a position (216).

What, then, is new about *Miss New India*? If we truly understand both her domestic and career lives as a "dead end" (216), then Angie / Anjali's life appears, at its heart, to differ little from the colonial stereotype of an Indian woman. Alternately torn between traditional marriage and a desire for a place in the globalized world, the main character might be understood in terms of the dichotomy between modernity and tradition so familiar to postcolonial studies. But this sort of splitting is also a common response to trauma. The dissociation that occurs following her rape is a classic coping mechanism: "She was Anjali. She could look down and see poor little Angie whimpering on her bed" (67). Notably, it is the presumably westernized Angie, rather than the more traditional Anjali, who has been violated in this passage. The alignment of rape and globalization is therefore explicit. It is Anjali, untouched by Western cultural norms, who is also unaffected by

forced penetration. Yet it is hard to blame westernization for the sexual violence that the main character experiences, given its context. Furthermore, this traumatic scene does not lead to a longer term reclamation of Anjali; the main character hardly uses this name once she moves to Bangalore.

Indeed, the bulk of the novel recounts her few months in Bangalore, which include experiences of shopping, drinking expensive coffee and acquiring a lover, among other things, but no paid work. If the early part of the novel is characterized by an unreconciled split between the main character's hybrid parts, then it is in Bangalore, which Apte describes as cosmopolitan in and of itself, that offers a more recognizably cosmopolitan vision, as demonstrated both by Angie's living situation and by her new globalized tastes and pursuits. It may be that in *Miss New India*, India itself is new, rather than its citizens.

In the course of the novel, Angie / Anjali moves from a parochial social context—her parents are firmly ensconced in their own Bengali minority community in Bihar—into a Bangalore community defined both by an expanded sense of Indian nationhood and new forms of transnationalism. When Angie / Anjali makes it to Bangalore and takes a room in Minnie Bagehot's boarding house, it seems initially as though she has entered into the space of a united but diverse nation. Her landlady is Anglo-Indian, while her fellow boarders are, respectively, Indian Muslim (Husseina), Goan Christian (Tookie), and South Indian Hindu (Sunita). As such, each represents a 'type' with which Angie has had no previous acquaintance. The house itself performs a repetition of the imperial project, in which Minnie, full of colonial nostalgia, attempts to impose order. Any sense of commonality among the tenants, however, is shattered repeatedly, and on both a symbolic and literal level. Ultimately, the house is wrecked and looted, with Minnie murdered and the tenants dispersing. Cracks show long before this cataclysm, however. Angie quickly comes to the conclusion that she is "*Indian in ways no one else in this house is Indian, except maybe poor little Sunita Sampath. I have no roots anywhere but in India. My ancestors were hated and persecuted by everyone but themselves*" (138; italics in original). This Hindu chauvinism is only reinforced by the fact that Husseina—Angie's fellow tenant and the first Muslim she has ever met—turns out to be a terrorist who frames Angie for her crime. Indeed, Angie stands out in the house not only for her unemployment, but for her conservatism. She disdains Sunita, one of the other boarders, for refusing to accept a groom who demands a dowry. Tookie, a Christian boarder, also turns out to be connected to the criminal underworld and the text raises the possibility that Tookie may bear responsibility for Minnie's death and the subsequent theft of the landlady's belongings.

While Angie's identity is compared to that of other Indian citizens, it is also juxtaposed with those of Indian descent living outside the subcontinent. Early in the novel, she has a chance encounter with Rabi Chatterjee, an American citizen of Indian heritage who has travelled to the country of his parents' birth to satisfy his curiosity and generate material for his creative projects. One such project turns out to be photographing Angie, thereby setting her, eventually, on a path towards

a modelling career. Angie is not only depicted as more Indian than non-Hindus, she is also more Indian than the Hindu, North-Indian descended Rabi, not only because he lives abroad, but because unlike Angie, he lacks the ability to identify and distinguish India's ethnic groups. This vision of Indianness appears to depend not only on the reification of ethnic, racial and religious categories, but also on other forms of exclusion. Rabi, like Peter, is gay, a fact which, for Angie, only serves to confirm their otherness.

It may be that the two options available to Anjali—an arranged marriage or call centre work—are not as different as they first appear. As Kate Mulholland has shown, call centre work has been understood and constructed primarily as emotional labour, a process which involves managing the emotions of frequently disgruntled callers while keeping one's own emotions in check. As such, it should be no surprise that such work has been largely gendered female, with the majority of agents in call centres worldwide being women. Indeed, while Angie initially perceives her roommates, who all work in call centres, as non-traditional, they largely adhere to gender norms. Husseina married a groom chosen by her father at age thirteen. Sunita is on the lookout for a husband. Tookie is engaged, though she also has a boyfriend on the side. Even Angie's flight from her family ends in her recuperation into another family after she fails her call centre prep course. Rather than becoming an independent career woman, Angie is taken under the wing of the course instructor, Parvati Chatterjee (sister to Tara Chatterjee in Mukherjee's earlier books *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*), becoming a daughter in a household that mirrors her own in terms of culture. The Chatterjee household may be more western and globalized (a fact signaled both by their class status and their cultural practices), but it is still firmly Hindu, high-caste and heteronormative in its disposition.

Gibson and Graham imagine a queer alternative to globalization that is figured not in terms of the penetrable, rapeable, female body, but in terms of a leaking and fluid body that can penetrate as well as be penetrated. Queerness does not, however, seem to be an antidote to either rape discourse or globalization in *Miss New India*. The most visible representatives of globalization in the novel are gay—Peter, Rabi, and Rabi's boyfriend Monish Lahiri, also known as the Bengali Svengali—and while they themselves are cosmopolitan, kind, and privileged, they, at best, participate in the amelioration of Angie / Anjali's trauma. She is the object both of their gazes (Moni and Rabi are both photographers) and of their charity. They are also wealthy, US-based subjects, who have arguably replaced biological reproduction—which as gay men they forego—with economic reproduction. She is attracted to both Rabi and Moni, unaware, initially, of their unsuitability as marriage partners. Rabi in particular mentors Anjali, providing her with the cultural capital that she later uses in her seduction of Girish Gujral. Husseina, whom Angie / Anjali initially admires for her perfect English, fashion sense and demeanor of worldly poise, is global, rather like Rabi and Moni, but her difference is evident from her transnational Islamic connections. Husseina's globalization is associated with terror as she bombs an airport—the quintessential space of the global

cosmopolitan. Furthermore, the fact that Husseina frames Angie for her crime, having dressed her housemate in her own designer clothes to facilitate this deception, offers a rather heavy-handed warning about the dangers of acceding to westernized commodity culture.

If Angie / Anjali is supposed to be the representative 'new' Indian subject, the book is also very much about her exceptionality. Angie's good looks make her cut out for stardom. Rabi Chatterjee's picture of her, dubbed the Mona Lisa of the Mofussils, rapidly becomes famous. Monish Lahiri also puts her on the cover of his handbook of attractive single Bengalis in Bangalore. Thus she enters into the mediascape, as described by Arjun Appadurai, even as she remains avowedly ignorant of it—a fact made painfully evident when she fails to understand the consequences of Husseina's post-bombing appearance on the BBC. Her best talent is not her ability to speak English, as Peter Champion initially believes, but to be, in the words of the text, a "mirror" (268) who represents the India that upper and lower class Indians, parochial and cosmopolitan alike, want to see.

Perhaps, following Carla Freeman, we can best understand Angie's story not as exemplary of globalization, but rather as one "situated within social and economic processes and cultural meanings that are central to globalization itself" (1010). In other words, she does not and cannot epitomize either globalized India or globalization more generally. Yet her experiences—from her childhood education, to her experience of rape, her career aspirations and her eventual stardom as a model—can only be articulated and understood via a language and reality that is always already globalized and cosmopolitan. This is particularly evident during Angie / Anjali's final return to Gauripur, where she is scheduled to give a talk to Peter's current crop of students about how they, too, can become a part of India shining.² She is not, therefore, globalization's passive victim, or at least not only its victim, but its agent. Any notion of a tradition that can be tidily contrasted with modernity also dissolves by the end of the novel. Anjali returns only to discover that rather than the oppressive place she recalls, the town is now a charming example of "Old India," "simmering with potential" that has now taken off (328). But the new India is very much like the old India. Indeed, as Angie / Anjali walks the streets of Gauripur she sees what she first thinks of as changes, and then wonders if these things (a cinema house, apartment blocks) had always been there. The epilogue is narrated not by Angie, but by another, nameless young woman, who expects to attend her speech, and hopes to be able to duplicate Anjali's only vaguely described success. These women's stories are therefore cyclical, rather than linear. By the end of the novel, Anjali may have indeed become the queer subject that J.K. Gibson-Graham describes, and is therefore ready to initiate others into globalization.

So India, it turns out, is a mirror too, capable of being both the promised land of Western-style capitalism and its stultifying pre-modern antithesis. This is true on multiple levels. In an interview with Poornima Apte, Mukherjee explains that this book departed so extensively from the previous two books in the trilogy, both of which were narrated by Tara Banerji—an older, upper class, cosmopolitan, diasporic Bengali

woman far more like the author who does not even appear in this book—because the publisher of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* went bankrupt and she needed to revise her original plan for this book extensively in order to find a new publisher. Mukherjee’s vision of India—like Anjali herself—is therefore very much for sale, and perhaps better reflects the marketplace for her novels, than India itself. Certainly, this novel reaffirms many truisms about globalization and call centre labour—even though none is actually depicted, and those who do that work remain peripheral to the novel. As I will discuss below, this is in stark contrast to *Stilettoes in the Boardroom* and *Bangalore Calling* both of which were written by authors with extensive personal experience of BPO work.

The globalization of this marketplace is relevant, albeit differently, to both the novel’s prospective western readership and its Indian one. In his analysis of popular Indian fiction and youth culture, Suman Gupta argues that Indian English-language popular fiction undertakes “an internal branding of India for internal consumption” (50). After all, the notion of India shining was sold not just abroad to prospective foreign investors, but to Indians at home via domestic marketing campaigns. The commercial success of Chetan Bhagat’s *One Night @ the Call Centre* also established that call centres are a subject of fascination for Indians well beyond the BPO industry itself. The English language, as well as its delinkage with regional places within India—in contrast to popular fiction in vernacular languages—is key to the branding function Gupta identifies. The primary audience for such books is one that simultaneously feels “at home within the most divergent cultures” (Kramatschek, quoted in Gupta 48) and insecure about “how well their English meets external, global standards,” despite their daily use of that language (Chand 411). Angie / Anjali experiences just this insecurity about her own language usage. The issue is not so much resolved as set aside. Her English is good enough—if not for call centre work, then for bigger, better things.

Gupta further argues that Indian youth remain conservative on a number of fronts, including matters of religion and caste. Angie / Anjali, with her attention to a narrowly defined notion of Indianness and her naiveté about sexuality, fits this mold. *Miss New India* may therefore be an attempt to either reflect, or appeal to, this readership. Bharati Mukherjee has admitted in an interview that the shift in focus in *Miss New India* was imposed by her new publisher, Harper Collins (see Apte), which has also expanded into India. Yet as of the summer of 2016, Mukherjee’s novels were not included on the Harper Collins India website, which would seem to confirm that her novels are marketed primarily to the west. In the remainder of this paper I turn my attention to two call centre novels by writers who are largely unknown outside India: Shruti Saxena’s *Stilettoes in the Boardroom* and Brinda S. Narayan’s *Bangalore Calling*, but whose novels target more clearly—and effectively—the Indian youth market. These novels go much further in rejecting the rape script of globalization to embrace local forms of cosmopolitanism that are both more tolerant, and less narrowly nationalist, than in *Miss New India*.

In Shruti Saxena's *Stilettoes in the Boardroom*, a diverse cast of women—Arya, Shivaa, and Sarahna—struggle for personal and professional success at BankPro, the BPO at the centre of the novel. The challenges they face are not just sexism and office politics (though these certainly abound), but also a desire on the part of their overseas associates to see the organization fail. Arya, the main character, is heavily invested in demonstrating the business acumen and cultural competence of Indians in the global marketplace. Like Anjali in *Miss New India*, she has struggled romantically, but Arya more actively wishes for professional success; a career is not forced upon her. Arya also represents Indian employees and their interests to the foreign managers who subcontract them for call centre work. But she uses this role to champion them, in their diversity, rather than simply recruit or erase them. Arya's cosmopolitanism is also evident from her ability to understand and manage the fears and machinations of her American parent corporation.

The global and sexual economies remain entwined in this novel, but in ways that contrast sharply with *Miss New India*. Arya's business acumen is not an alternative to romantic success, but it facilitates it. Her cross-cultural competency is what makes Arya a suitable romantic partner for her Indian-American boss, Sam. And unlike Rabi in *Miss New India*, Sam is not truly foreign; he is helpfully at home both in North America and on the subcontinent. This is not to say that the relationship between work and home is an unequivocally happy one in *Stilettoes in the Boardroom*. The story of Arya's colleague, Shivaa, becomes a rather conservative object lesson in the need for married professional women to balance domestic and work-related responsibilities. Shivaa's husband has an affair, threatening their marriage, allegedly because she works late too frequently.

Yet there are a number of ways in which globalized work is clearly liberating. Even Shivaa must only learn to temper her commitment to the office, not give up her career. (Her marriage is ultimately saved.) For Sarahna, a more junior employee who is hired by the main female characters, employment at BankPro is an explicit attempt to distance herself from her parochial Sikh background, and with it, from gendered norms around dress and family structure. Contrary to her family's fear, Sarahna's employment leads to neither literal nor symbolic sexual exploitation. Like Anjali, Sarahna escapes arranged marriage, but the latter also avoids the rape script.

Sarahna changing her clothes for work is an explicit focus in *Stilettoes in the Boardroom*, and signals one of the ways in which call centre work proves liberating, providing opportunities both for individuation and lived hybridity. Indeed, clothing becomes an important means for women to perform their own cosmopolitanism in all three texts. As Dorothy Jones points out, "[m]ediating between the body (associated with what is private and personal) and the external world, which simultaneously requires decent concealment and display, [clothing] becomes an important indicator of social identity and difference. For women, it also marks conformity with accepted ideals of femininity" (378). For women like Sarahna in *Stilettoes in the*

Boardroom and Bitty in *Bangalore Calling*, who change their clothes as they mediate between the domestic space of the home and its forms of gendered sociality, and the public, globalized spaces of the call centre and the shopping mall, clothing functions as a sign of cosmopolitanism. Whereas changing clothes leads Angie to risk imprisonment in *Miss New India*, as it imbricates her in international terrorism, it proves far less dangerous in the other novels. Bitty risks excessive personal debt (she consistently overspends at the mall), but this is largely due to the extent, not the nature, of her wardrobe. Sarahna experiences her ability to code-switch via attire as primarily empowering.

Clothing, however, is not the only sign of cosmopolitanism in these texts, nor is this sort of identity restricted exclusively to women. As J.K. Tina Basi notes, call centre work imposes “institutionalized cosmopolitanism” on women workers, producing an “‘aestheticization’ of work identities” which gives “rise to ‘ethnic fusion,’ signifying modernity and upward mobility” (164). It is not just their attire, but their very identities, then, that are fused; the two are inexorably linked. Call centre work is therefore inexorably linked to cosmopolitanism on multiple levels. The change in style that Basi observes also goes beyond a simple act of code-switching. As Stephanie Stonehewer Southmayd points out,

The workers described in call-centre lit undergo a profound transition with the call-centre or transnational, assuming a hybrid identity not quite ‘Indian’ and yet not ‘Western’—an identity we may only be able to describe, vaguely, as ‘globalized.’
(7)

This literary representation of Indian call centres is supported by sociological accounts of the work itself. Basi explains that “[t]ransnational Indian call-centre workers participate in globalizing discourses and processes, by way of the interaction with people living outside India, which in turn produce globalized identities” (34). I would argue, however, that we might better be able to understand this change in identities in terms of cosmopolitanism, not only globalization, not least because it is a discourse that is already available within the corporate culture of BPOs.

Robert Halsall elucidates the concept of “corporate cosmopolitanism,” in which managers are directed as to how to think and interact cross-culturally within the context of an increasingly globalized economy, a process which is fictionalized in *Stilettoes in the Boardroom*. This discourse of corporate cosmopolitanism,

draws for its legitimacy both on the Enlightenment tradition of cosmopolitanism, in order to imbue the required flexibility of the manager with the morally uplifting sentiments of...an “ideal of detachment,” and also on the recent critique of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, particularly in the discourse of “hybridity.”
(Halsall S138)

While call centre work is not identical to the managerial work Halsall describes, it nonetheless requires this vacillation between detachment and hybridity, which is central to its status as emotional labour. On the one hand, call centre employees need to understand and provide

sympathy for customers who often phone to report a problem in a state of agitation. To perform this function successfully, the employee emphasizes their identification with and availability to the customer. On the other, the employee needs to remain calm and detached, both in order to soothe the disgruntled caller, and to remain emotionally equipped to handle hundreds of such callers over the course of his or her shift. I would suggest that hybridity enables employees to perform the former function, while detachment is key to the latter. I would therefore argue that BPO work can best be imagined as a regime “of labor intimacy” despite the fact that this work occurs in the public sphere and the “world of global finance, production, trade and telecommunications” (Chang and Ling 27), which troubles the erstwhile distinction that Kimberley Chang and L. H. M. Ling draw between these putatively distinct and gendered spheres of globalization.

Furthermore, this particular kind of emotional labour, with its decidedly gendered status, challenges received conceptualizations of both cosmopolitanism and globalization. The cosmopolitan whom Halsall identifies, with roots in the enlightenment, is not only implicitly white, but implicitly male. Yet if we accept either the sociological or fictional representations of call centre labour, call centre work may engender, or even privilege, specifically female forms of cosmopolitanism, as well as cosmopolitanism that is more distanced from the elite world of global managers. It is certainly the case that call centre cosmopolitanism is depicted as classed, in both sociological and literary texts. Sarahna’s class status in *Stilletos in the Boardroom* is highlighted for the reader in a chapter entitled “The Proletarian.” This title, however, plays with the reader’s class-based expectations. While in classic Marxist theory, the proletariat’s main resource is his or her labour power, this is hardly an accurate description of Sarahna, whose education and life circumstances mark her as lower middle class in an Indian context. If she lacks material possessions, it is because as an unmarried daughter, she is unable to control or mobilize household resources. Call centre labour, however, offers precisely the material autonomy she seeks, and the power to resist marriage, at least for a time. This is not globalization as rape, but something else. If it is not quite the queer vision of globalization that Gibson and Graham imagine as the alternative to the rape script, it certainly suggests a less passive and more ambivalent role for women than the rape script allows.

Shehzad Nadeem, who also studies actual call centre employees, notes the interstitial cultural and economic position of these workers, though he does not use the language of cosmopolitanism. Instead, Nadeem concludes that today’s BPO workers are the new comprador class (109). Rather than hybridity, he sees the employees as engaging in a form of mimicry which “is foremost a privilege, the product of a negative liberty. In order to separate oneself from the common rabble, to identify meaningfully with an outside culture, one must be able to afford its trappings” (Nadeem 113). While call centre cosmopolitanism is perhaps less privileged than enlightenment conceptions of the term allow, it is hardly available to subalterns. I argue that we need not see these workers’ adoption of western consumer culture in quite the

negative and derivative terms that Nadeem uses. Mimicry in Homi Bhabha's sense is not simply imitative, but transgressive. The cosmopolitanism of the call centre employee therefore is complicit with the agenda of corporate globalization, as Nadeem suggests, but nevertheless threatens to collapse the distinction between the West and the rest in a manner that potentially challenges Americans and Indians alike.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Brinda S. Narayan's *Bangalore Calling*. In this novel, any essentializing oppositions between India and the West are always already spurious. That text centres on the experiences of a BPO trainer named Yvette. Of Anglo-Indian descent, and a Christian, Yvette's name and upbringing challenge normative Hindu nationalism, and, as the novel makes clear, did so long before economic liberalization arrived in 1991. Indeed, though sensitive about her difference, Yvette realizes that in the call centre context, there is no need to discuss it, making it perhaps less of a sticking point than in other workplaces. Yvette realizes that her colleagues "thought she was Syrian Christian, or, more likely...hadn't thought about her at all" (14). In her cosmopolitan world, learning about culture is an ongoing process—even one's own (25); realizing that others do not notice, or do not care about, her mixed-race identity forces Yvette to re-assess its meaning. After all, isn't Yvette's existence, like that of Indian Muslims and so many others, proof that India has always been hybrid and global?

At the same time, the call centre is frequently the place where the cosmopolitan is domesticated. For Arya, the main character in *Stilettoes in the Boardroom*, BankPro is not only the place where she proves her professional acumen through her clever management, but also where she finds true love, in the form of Samatha, also known as Sam, who is her boss and a US-retained Indian. The novel concludes with Arya finding not only personal happiness, but greater insight into the world of global capitalism through her relationship with him. But the novel ends with an emphasis on their romantic relationship, with Sam's declaration of love receiving the final word. Structurally, the novel also domesticates the cosmopolitan. The globalized stories of Sara, Shiva and Arya, are interspersed with section prefaces and other content derived from Hindu texts such as the *Mahabharata*. The extracts' relationship to the main plot sometimes serves as a gloss, but at other times is more tangential. Often classified as "chick lit" (Turner 4), *Stilettoes in the Boardroom* nevertheless interrupts, and Indianizes, that mode through its form.

Form is also an implicit, though important, part of the cosmopolitanism of *Bangalore Calling*. That text consists of 15 interwoven short stories, each of which focuses on a different call centre employee. The employees are diverse in terms of class, ethnicity and religious background, as well as gender and ability, but are brought together by their common workplace. The structure of the novel enacts the unity in diversity that the call centre itself constructs. Despite its imbrication in the global economy, then, the call centre narrative employs a familiar Indian nationalist trope, reaffirming the centrality of the nation, and the novel, even in a globalized, digital world.³ The ending of *Bangalore Calling* also domesticates call centre labour, albeit

in a less optimistic fashion. In the final chapter of that text, Yvette has left her job as a BPO trainer to pursue graduate work in sociology. The title of her thesis is “*Cultural Labour in Call Centres*” (288; italics in original). Her initial research experience is discouraging. Yvette’s prospective supervisor claims the world she wants to study is “not the real India” and dismisses her theoretical framework, which is explicitly influenced by Arlie Hochschild (who first theorized emotional labour), a US-based sociologist, stating “[d]on’t assume everything written there is relevant here” (288). Yvette counters that the world she wishes to study is “India too” (ibid).

Her academic supervisor repeatedly dismisses Yvette’s concerns about class and language in the call centre environment as irrelevant. The biggest blow to Yvette, however, is not his ongoing lack of support, nor the dismay of her former Callus colleagues, when they learn that her research findings paint BPO work in a less than ideal light. Shortly before graduation, Yvette picks up the latest issue of a fictional academic journal, *Global Sociology Quarterly*, only to discover that her research has been published there by her reluctant supervisor, but under his own name. The worst forms of exploitative labour are not, the texts suggest, either new or particular to global capitalism. Rather, that most traditionalist sphere of labour—academia, from which so many critiques of globalization emulate—turns out to be where Yvette feels most exploited. This exploitation comes not from global capital, but from the hierarchical and patriarchal traditions which have long made it possible for tenured professors to benefit from graduate student labour—sometimes at the expense of the students themselves.

Bangalore Calling concludes with Yvette’s acceptance of her supervisor’s plagiarism, which she dismisses as irrelevant, asking: “who reads sociology journals anyway?” Instead, she turns her attention to “Indian fiction” which, we are told, is “burgeoning by the week” (305). Even Yvette’s experience of exploitation, then, is available for re-appropriation—for humour, as well as profit. Indeed, Brinda S. Narayan and Shruti Saxena are both veterans of the BPO industry, and their literary success stems closely from their corporate experiences. The ending of *Bangalore Calling* foreshadows the author’s recuperation of her own ambivalent call centre experiences through the embrace of global publishing. That novel is, after all, published by Hachette India, and endorsed by Arlie Hochschild, whose scholarship expressly influenced both the real Brinda S. Narayan and, within the novel, the fictional Yvette.

Contemporary Indian texts therefore construct a local cosmopolitanism that simultaneously challenges Eurocentric discourses of cosmopolitanism and established theories of postcolonialism. Far from figuring globalization as a source of imposed hybridity (and therefore hegemony), I contend that contemporary popular authors often revel in the ironic potential of globalization, finding in call centre mishap and miscommunication an opportunity to deploy the laughter of survival, thereby reaffirming an identity that is both local and worldly. As Shehzad Nadeem states, “[w]here some see tight control over emotions and personality and ‘dramaturgical stress,’ many workers see

the freedom to create an identity” (113). This cosmopolitan freedom is localized and even domesticated, both within the content of contemporary Indian fiction and via the growing marketplace for English-language Indian books. It is perhaps a fitting irony that the two resident Indian authors discussed here—Brinda S. Narayan and Shruti Saxena—present a vision that is ultimately more hopeful, and more cosmopolitan, than the diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee, whose claims to cosmopolitanism might, on the surface, appear more robust.

Notes

1. J.K. Gibson-Graham is the pen-name of human geographer Katherine Gibson and her partner Julie Graham.

2. “India Shining” became a campaign slogan for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in 2004. As Seema Khanwalkar points out, this was an act of branding intended not only to boost the BJP but to celebrate an image of post-liberalization India as modern, prosperous and youth-driven. The phrase has since been widely used in economic, political, sociological and cultural discourse to variously assess India’s direction over the last decade.

3. As Timothy Brennan famously explains, the novel is the form most associated with and appropriate to “the ‘one, yet many’ of national life” (49-50).

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